



REPORT  
OF THE  
IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE  
OF THE  
HON. THE COMMISSIONERS OF SEWERS  
OF THE  
CITY OF LONDON,  
ON  
CITY BURIAL-PLACES,  
WITH THE REPORT OF THE  
MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH  
THEREUPON.

*Ordered to be Printed, December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1852.*

LONDON:  
PRINTED BY C. DAWSON, 148 $\frac{1}{2}$ , FENCHURCH STREET.  
1852.





REPORT  
OF THE  
IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE  
OF THE  
HON. THE COMMISSIONERS OF SEWERS  
OF THE  
CITY OF LONDON,  
ON  
CITY BURIAL-PLACES,  
WITH THE REPORT OF THE  
MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH  
THEREUPON.

---

*Ordered to be Printed, December 14th, 1852.*

---

LONDON:  
PRINTED BY C. DAWSON, 148 $\frac{1}{2}$ , FENCHURCH STREET.  
1852.



*At a Meeting of the Commissioners of Sewers of the  
City of London, held in the Guildhall of the  
said City, on Tuesday, December 14th, 1852.*

W. A. PEACOCK, ESQ., *Deputy, in the Chair.*

The Report of the Improvement Committee, as  
hereunto annexed, was laid before the Court and  
read.

ORDERED,

That the same, together with the Report of the  
Medical Officer of Health therein referred to, be  
printed, and a copy thereof be sent to every Mem-  
ber of this Court.

JOSEPH DAW,  
*Principal Clerk.*



TO THE HON. THE COMMISSIONERS OF SEWERS OF  
THE CITY OF LONDON.

We whose names are hereunto set, your Committee upon Improvements, to whom it has been referred to make preliminary inquiries in respect of Intramural Interments in the City of London, with reference to the provisions of the Act of Parliament of last Session upon the same, Do certify that we have been actively engaged in obtaining the necessary preliminary information, and are still pursuing our inquiries therein, and hope before long to report finally upon the questions referred to us.

We beg, however, at once to report to your Honorable Court, that the Medical Officer of Health having given his opinion that the City of London is absolutely unfit to serve as a further Burial-place for the Dead, in our judgment steps should be taken for closing the several Burial-places within this City.

(Signed) W. A. PEACOCK,  
T. H. HALL,  
H. LOWMAN TAYLOR,  
EDWARD HARRISON,  
T. I. HOLT.

Dated this 10th day of December, 1852.





REPORT  
ON THE  
CITY BURIAL-PLACES,  
BY THE  
MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH.

---

TO THE IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE OF THE HON.  
THE COMMISSIONERS OF SEWERS OF THE CITY  
OF LONDON.

Lancaster Place, Dec. 10th, 1852.

GENTLEMEN,

IN order to an application of the Metropolitan Burials Act by the constituted authorities of the City, you have requested me to report how far, in my judgment, the existing burial-places within this jurisdiction are fit for further reception of the dead.

I have little to add to the information which I have laid before the Commission in my successive annual reports—especially in that of 1849, and which long since induced me to express my con-

viction "that the City of London could no longer with safety or propriety be allowed to furnish intramural burial to its dead."

It would, indeed, be ridiculous if I should pretend to you that this part of the subject requires any further inquiry. Putrefactive decomposition of one kind and another is the principal cause of town-unhealthiness. Against its occurrence round about our houses all your legislation is directed. The human body, once destitute of life, furnishes no exception to the laws of organic decay: under the common laws of chemical change, it soon dissolves itself into products neither less offensive, nor less poisonous, than those of any brute's decomposition. And you cannot take a juster view of the subject—you cannot arrive at stronger arguments for the immediate abolition of intramural interment, than by forcing yourselves to discard for a moment all memory of the fading human outline which masks this dreadful nuisance, and to conceive it as *a mere bulk of animal matter*, planted every year to undergo decomposition within the City, beneath our Churches, and before our thresholds.\*

Dead bodies thus buried contribute importantly in their neighbourhood to the vitiation of air and water. Those that lie shelved in vaults, eventually,

\* The right of interment in the City may at present be claimed in respect probably of more than three thousand corpses per annum. The number actually interred of late years has, I believe, not exceeded an average of two thousand per annum.

if not at first, spread through the atmosphere every product of their decomposition. Those that are dug into the soil have their decay modified by its influence, mingle with its drainage the products of their transformation, and thus (as I have shown in my remarks on the Bishopsgate pump water) find their issue in the nearest land-spring of the spot, polluting the drink of the population. Further, in all the more frequented burial-grounds, the soil seems to be saturated with animal matters only partially transformed; and at every new disturbance by the spade, a fresh quantity of this unctuous clay comes upmost, tainting the air with materials of foetid decomposition, often to the great distress of persons who dwell in the vicinity.

On such grounds as these, I cannot hesitate in renewing my report that the City of London is absolutely unfit to serve as a further burial-place for the dead; and this, whether by inhumation or in vaults, whether in parochial burying-grounds, or in those of other communities.

Regard being had to the object of your reference, you would probably not desire me at present to enter on the ulterior questions of extramural interment.

On such representations as I have made, the Court of Common Council (acting under the Metropolitan Act already referred to) has authority to determine in respect of the City of London, whether the existing places of burial, either from their

insufficiency, or from their dangerousness to health, are so unfit for their purpose as to render it necessary that other burial-space be provided.

Should they affirm this view, they can then “authorise and direct the Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London to exercise for the said City and Liberties all the powers and authorities vested in Burial-Boards under the Act.”

This course being taken, the Commission (subject to approval from the Secretary of State) will have authority to make all arrangements requisite for the final closure of burial-places within the City.

In approaching the subject of extramural sepulture, with its innumerable details of inquiry, for site, for conveyance, and for burial—details which form the knowledge and experience of a special class of persons, the Commission may perhaps first consider whether works so foreign to their usual functions shall be undertaken by themselves directly, or shall be made matter of contract with existing Cemetery Companies, or other associations or individuals. Till this decision is made, it seems impossible to conjecture what topics you may wish to entertain, or within what limits the industry of your officers may most usefully be exercised.

There are many very important parts of the subject with which it may hereafter become my duty to deal; but till the preliminary questions are settled, it would be idle to detain you with sanitary

considerations belonging to a later stage of your inquiry.

As my Report for 1849 has long been out of print, I subjoin an extract from it of so much as relates to the matter in hand.

I have the honor to remain,

Gentlemen,

Your obedient Servant,

JOHN SIMON.

## APPENDIX.

---

*Extract from first Annual Report of Officer of  
Health, dated November 6th, 1849.*

---

\* \* \* \* \*

“In compliance with an order of the Health-Committee, I have examined as fully as circumstances would allow into the requirements of the City of London in respect of burial accommodation, and the result of my inquiry obliges me to express my conviction, that the City can no longer with safety or propriety be allowed to furnish intramural interment to its dead.

“In all those larger parochial burying-grounds where the maintenance of a right to bury can be considered important,—in all such, and in most others, too, the soil is saturated and supersaturated with animal matter undergoing slow decomposition. There are, indeed, few of the older burial-grounds of the City where the soil does not rise many feet above its original level, testifying to the large



amount of animal matter which rots beneath the surface. The vaults beneath churches are, in many instances, similarly overloaded with materials of putrefaction, and the atmosphere, which should be kept pure and without admixture for the living, is hourly tainted with the fœtid emanations of the dead. For the most part, houses are seen to rise on all sides in immediate contiguity to the burial-ground, forbidding the possibility of even such ventilation as might diminish the evil; and the inhabitants of such houses complain bitterly, as they well may, of the inconvenience which they suffer from this confined and noxious atmosphere.

“ With respect to burial in vaults, which prevails to a very great and dangerous extent in this City, I may observe that, among persons who are ill-informed on the subject, there exist erroneous notions as to the preservation of bodies under these circumstances. They are supposed, from the complete closure of their coffins, to remain unchanged for ages, like the embalmed bodies of Egypt and Peru; or, at least, if perhaps they undergo some interior and invisible change (as the chrysalis within its sheath) yet to suffer no interference with their general arrangement, no breach in the compactness of their envelope. Nothing can be less correct than this supposition.

“ It is unnecessary that I should detail to you the process of decay, as it occurs within the charnel-house, nor need I inquire for your information

whether indeed it be true, as alleged, that part of the duty of a sexton consists in tapping the recent coffins, so as to facilitate the escape of gases which otherwise would detonate from their confinement. It is sufficient that I should state, that whether such be or be not the duty of the functionary in question, a time certainly comes, sooner or later, when every corpse buried in the vault of a church spreads the products of its decomposition through the air as freely as though no shell had enclosed it. It is matter of the utmost notoriety that, under all ordinary conditions of vault-sepulture, the wooden case of the coffin speedily decays and crumbles, while the interior leaden one, bending with the pressure of whatever mass may be above it (or often with its own weight) yields, bulges, and bursts as surely as would a paper hat-box under the weight of a laden portmanteau.

“If the accuracy of this description be doubted, let inquiry be made on a large scale after the coffins of 40 years back\*—let it be seen how many will appear! If, on the contrary, its accuracy be granted, then I apprehend nothing further need be urged,

\* Perhaps the expressions in my text are somewhat too general; not indeed as to the fact of the coffins *ultimately* giving vent to their fœtid contents (which is the real point at issue) but as to the time within which this occurs. In the dryer and better kept vaults a longer period certainly elapses than that suggested; in the worse, probably a shorter one. The sooner or later is of no practical importance: but, on re-perusing my Report, I think it right to add this qualification.  
—December, 1852. J. S.



to establish the importance of abolishing a system which maintains on so large a scale the open putrefaction of human remains within places of frequent resort, and in the midst of populous habitations.

“ It is a very serious matter for consideration, that close beneath the feet of those who attend the services of their church, there often lies an almost solid pile of decomposing human remains, co-extensive with the area of the building, heaped as high as the vaulting will permit, and generally (as I have shown) but very partially confined. And if it be the case, as perhaps it may be, that the frequenters of the place of worship do not complain of any vitiation of the atmosphere, or perhaps do not experience it, not the less is it true that such a vitiation occurs, and (whether to the special detriment of the congregation or not) contributes to the overladen putrefactiveness of our London atmosphere.

In respect of such vaults, I do not consider that the mere cessation of burial in them will be sufficient; seeing that at the present moment they contain amongst them many thousand coffins, as yet tenanted by the materials of decomposition; and year after year, if left in their present state, these will be poisoning the air with successive instalments of their progressive decay. It seems to me quite indispensable that some comprehensive measure should be undertaken, for abolishing at once and for ever all burial within the City of London. Conjointly

with the general application to Parliament, for prohibition of further intramural sepulture, I would recommend that authority be obtained by the City, for its several parishes to procure the decent removal to extramural cemeteries of such coffins as already occupy their vaults; or, failing this measure, I would recommend that all coffins now lying within vaults, be walled up in their present resting places, with uniform impermeable masonry. For very obvious reasons I should prefer the former plan to the latter.

“Intramural burial is an evil, no doubt, that varies in its intensity according to the numbers interred; becoming appreciable in its effects on health (so far as the rough measure of statistics can inform us) only when several interments occur annually, or when ground is disturbed wherein much animal matter had previously been left to decay. But—be the evil large or little in any particular case, evil undoubtedly it is in all, and an unmitigated evil.

“The atmosphere in which epidemic and infectious diseases most readily diffuse their poison and multiply their victims is one, as I have already often stated, in which organic matters are undergoing decomposition. Whence these may be derived signifies little. Whether the matter passing into decay be an accumulation of soaking straw and cabbage-leaves in some miserable cellar, or the garbage of a slaughter-house, or an overflowing

cesspool, or dead dogs floated at high water into the mouth of a sewer, or stinking fish thrown overboard in Billingsgate-dock, or the remains of human corpses undergoing their last chemical changes in consecrated earth, the previous history of the decomposed material is of no moment whatever. The pathologist knows no difference of operation between one decaying animal substance and another. As soon as he recognizes such matter undergoing decomposition, so soon he recognizes the most fertile soil for the increase of epidemic diseases; and I may state with certainty, that there are many churchyards in the City of London, where every spadeful of soil turned up in burial sensibly adds to the amount of animal decomposition, which advances—too often inevitably, around us. I have, therefore, no hesitation in accounting intramural interment as one of the influences prevailing against health within the City of London; and I have no doubt that it contributes considerably to swell our lists of deaths from fever and the allied disorders.

“Nor can I refrain from adding, as a matter claiming attention, that in the performance of intramural interment there constantly occur disgusting incidents dependent on overcrowdedness of the burial-ground; incidents which convert the extremest solemnity of religion into an occasion for sickness and horror; perhaps mingling with the ritual of the Church some clamour of gravediggers who have miscalculated their space; perhaps diffus-

ing amidst the mourners some nauseous evidence and conviction, that a prior tenant of the tomb has been prematurely displaced, or that the spade has impatiently anticipated the slower dismembering of decay. Cases of this nature are fresh in the memory of the public; cases of extreme nuisance and brutal desecration, in place of decent and solemn interment; and it is unnecessary that I should revive the record of transactions inconsistent with even the dawn of civilization.

“From the circumstances which I have mentioned, it can hardly fail to appear most desirable to you, that the use of some spacious and open cemetery at a distance from the City should be substituted for the present system of intramural interment; and the urgency of this requirement will be demonstrated all the more cogently, when it is remembered that the annual amount of mortality in the City averages above 3000, and that under the present arrangements every dead body buried within our walls receives its accommodation at the expense of the living, and to their great detriment.

\* \* \* \* \*